ELSEVIER

History of European Ideas 33 (2007) 174–194

History of European Ideas

www.elsevier.com/locate/histeuroideas

From experience to law: Leo Strauss and the Weimar crisis of the philosophy of religion

Samuel Moyn

Department of History, Columbia University, USA

Available online 20 February 2007

Abstract

This paper is a study of the origins of Leo Strauss's thought, arguing that its early development must be understood in the context of the philosophy of religion of late Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. More specifically, it shows that Strauss's early works were written against the background of Kantian philosophy and post-Kantian accounts of religious experience, and that his turn towards medieval law as a topic and ideal was precipitated by the critique of those accounts by radical Protestant theologians writing in the post-World War I era of crisis. Ironically, then, Strauss's investment in premodern Judaism—and his related rejection of modern philosophy—had important Christian origins.
© 2007 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: Leo Strauss; Religious experience; Rudolf Otto; Karl Barth; Hermann Cohen; Franz Rosenzweig; Theology

Introduction

Thanks to the newly available early writings of Leo Strauss, both in German and in English, it is possible to grasp the logic of his early trajectory with far more clarity than ever before.[1] This paper contends that important insight is to be gained by understanding Strauss's early evolution as beginning with a flirtation with, and ending in an abandonment of, a central modern conception of the relation between God and man. It was the collapse of an *experientialist* theory of religion—in crisis throughout the theology

E-mail address: s.moyn@columbia.edu.

[1] Leo Strauss. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Heinrich Meier. 3 vols. (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1996–2001). Strauss. *The Early Writings (1921–1932)*. Ed. and trans. Michael Zank. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

0191-6599/$ - see front matter © 2007 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
doi:10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2006.11.004

of the period—that explains the conditions that gave rise to Strauss's famous discovery of the role of law in premodern Jewish philosophy and culture. Strauss's perception and definition of this crisis owed almost everything to the philosophical and (in particular) the theological discussion of his time, even if he offered a novel sequel to the crisis he weathered in common with his contemporaries. From experience to law, then.

The new evidence requires some basic philology. For it is remarkable how thoroughgoing and pervasive Strauss's attention to the problem of religious "experience" [*Erfahrung*] remained throughout his early years, beginning with his very earliest writings. The sheer frequency of his discussions of the problem, in different forms, suggests how central a study of the category has to be in the examination of his early thought. But it is also critical to adopt a contextualist methodology toward the new material. The stages of Strauss's engagement with the theme, and thus the position that resulted from it, are only intelligible if they are understood in relation to discussions at the time in Germany, both philosophical and theological. Extending David Myers's recent emphasis on the need for a transconfessional situation of the fortunes of Jewish thought in this period, I will argue that Strauss's understanding of the crisis of the philosophy of the Jewish religion reflected his deep engagement with Protestant theology, which shaped in critical ways his assumptions about the present difficulties and alternative futures of Jewish thought.[2]

To put my claim briefly, though perhaps too provocatively, Strauss initially hoped to remodel Judaism in terms of the ongoing search for a renovated Protestantism of his time, in which the existence and relevance of God seemed most adequately theorized and firmly secured through an appeal to *the subjective experience of the divine*. One way of reading Strauss's early career is as a process of progressive disenchantment with the power of Protestant experientialism, not simply as a model for Judaism but on its own terms. Ironically, however, in his perception of the failure of the experientialist model, Strauss again followed Protestant thinkers, who were remorselessly criticizing their own tradition at the time. In common with the others, Strauss ran up against the limits of a subjectivist philosophy, which—although they had been discovered and tested earlier—were only broken through thanks to World War I. Only in moving altogether beyond the model of experientialism, both as promising and problematic, toward law did Strauss transcend the Protestant debate in a genuinely unique way.

Biographical prelude

Born on September 20, 1899 in Kirchhain, Hesse, Strauss began life as a rural Jew. He came from a middle class family, but his situation was nonetheless quite different from that of other members of the twentieth-century Jewish intelligentsia, who typically came from cities and whose families had often already moved far away from orthopraxy. The ties of Strauss's family to the region dated to the mid-nineteenth century; the area's Jews had been civically emancipated only in 1869, shortly after its Prussian annexation. His ancestors, and his father, were graintraders. In Strauss's youth, Reform Judaism, popular in cities, had no local purchase, and his parents were orthopractic. Yet Strauss retrospectively portrayed his parents' religiosity, along with that of the *Landjudentum* of his youthful surroundings, as that of bumpkinhood. He later recalled that there was an emphasis on the

[2]David N. Myers. *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003).

preservation and transmission of Jewish ritual observance, with little substantive knowledge about the origins or even meaning of such practices.

Strauss's early milieu was characterized by two other important features: antisemitism that strengthened his Jewish identity and classical education that distanced him from it in any traditional form. Though he eventually remarked on the "profound peace" in which Kirchhain Jews coexisted with their neighbors, the overall region had been riled by antisemitic agitation, especially that of a local demagogue named Otto Böckel, who had the nickname of "peasant king". The closest urban outpost was the university town of Marburg, where Hermann Cohen, the only Jew then appointed a philosophy chair in the empire, taught and campaigned against Böckel and other antisemites.

As a youth, Strauss attended the Kirchhain *Gymnasium*, where the curriculum was completely secular, except for the small amount of religious instruction, which the Jewish students (about 7 percent of the school) took separately. But this latter seems not to have been of much significance. Strauss's first encounters with philosophy occurred in this context: "Furtively I read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche", he recalled of his gymnasium years. "When I was sixteen and we read the *Laches* in school, I formed the plan, or the wish, to spend my life reading Plato and breeding rabbits while earning my livelihood as a rural postmaster. Without being aware of it, I had moved rather far away from my Jewish home, without any rebellion". In fact, by the time he was a teenager Strauss had become an atheist, and as soon as he left his parents' home his observance fell below even a very basic minimum.

It was against this background that Strauss came to attend the University of Marburg at the end of World War I. The overall conclusion to be drawn from this biographical material is simply that there would have been no way to infer his mature, highly theorized interpretation of Judaism from his roots—put differently, he did not bring Judaism to philosophy but discovered or invented the former in the course of doing the latter.[3] This conclusion puts the premium on understanding the state of the field as Strauss came to it, a field in which what I shall call subjectivism and experientialism were in their final throes.

Outside the subject through the subject

The crisis of a subjectivist and experientialist approach in theology in the aftermath of World War I is best understood as a response to the difficulties of the very foundations of modern religion and, especially, of the modern philosophy of religion. Philosophically, experientialism in religious thought arose in response to Immanuel Kant, even if sociologically, as figures like Marcel Gauchet and Charles Taylor suggest, the new interpretation of religion as subjective experience merely reflected the collapse of religion as the agent of social integration and collective meaning. Individual "experience", stereotypically in Protestant piety, became the last redoubt of religion after the disappearance of religion as collective governance.[4] Still, since Strauss engaged in the

[3]For all of the material in this section, see the fine study by Eugene Sheppard. *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile. The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham: Brandeis UP, 2006) citations at 12–13.

[4]See Marcel Gauchet. *Le désenchantement du monde: Histoire politique de la religion*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). In English as *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. Trans. Oscar Burge. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), on "the religious after religion". See also Charles Taylor. *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2002), for a similar distinction between "Durkheimian" religion and "post-Durkheimian" religiosity.

debate as a philosopher of religion, it may help to begin with a simplified narrative of the modern fortunes of his discipline in Germany from its inception up to Strauss's time.

Kant, of course, destroyed traditional forms of religious inquiry and allowed a new one. If Mark Lilla is right, Kant ushered in a "theologico-political" revolution no less radical than the one Strauss identified with Spinoza's thought.[5] In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the "all-destroying" Kant ruined the traditional proofs of God's existence; if he set himself the task, in his famous claim, of "limiting reason to make room for faith", it would have to be a faith discovered through the analysis of subjective experience, which Kant understood as the only way left for philosophy after metaphysics. In the event, of course, Kant managed to recover God as a "postulate" of practical reason, without which morality would be incomplete.[6] Few were satisfied, however, with so reductive an account of religion; the surprise is that it took so long for champions of a vision of religion as collective, practical, ritualistic or legal in essence to challenge Kant's individualist and internalist model, for the most prominent criticisms of Kant for a long time came from within Protestantism and attempted to supplement and correct his conception without breaking with either his individualism or internalism.

It was in this campaign that the theology of *religious experience* emerged in the nineteenth century. No doubt, as I have noted, the appeal of experientialism is rooted in early modern developments in religious history (in particular, in Protestant innovations in devotion), but it came to be most influentially articulated as a *philosophical* position by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), by way of response to the limitations of Kant's moral religion. As he put it in his famous *Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers*, the proper response to Kant's apparent reduction of religion to ethical practice was to view the emotions as the incidents of, and the key to, the religious life that Kant had inadequately theorized. The hallmark of religion is, in Schleiermacher's phrase, "the feeling of absolute dependence", but from a philosophical point of view all emotions fell within religion's proprietary domain. "The ancients knew what was right", he wrote:

> For them … feelings were an essential part of religion, the noblest part… . [But] your [Kantian] doctrine of morals, when it is strict and pure, acknowledges no reverence but its own law… . Be content to consider [emotions] religion, and then you will not need to demand anything for them other than their own sure rights … Return them to religion: the treasure belongs to it alone. As the possessor of it, religion is for morality and all else that is an object of human doing, not the handmaid, but an indispensable friend … This is the rank of religion, as the sum of all higher feelings.[7]

The stress on the emotional life reflected Schleiermacher's intent, after Kant, to re-embed the infinite in the finite, allowing through experience of the world the relation with God that Kant's philosophy seemed to rule out. But while Schleiermacher's intent as to the reach of this experiential capacity—its epistemic credentials, so to speak—is a matter of continuing dispute, it is possible to view his argument as consistent in its intent with Kant's enterprise. For Schleiermacher, the capacity to have religious experience takes its place

[5]Mark Lilla. "Kant's Theologico-Political Revolution". *Review of Metaphysics* 52: 2 (December 1998) 397–434.

[6]The best account remains Allen Wood. *Kant's Moral Religion*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1972); on postulates, see Paul Guyer, "From a Practical Point of View: Kant's Conception of a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason". *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 333–71.

[7]Friedrich Schleiermacher. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) 84–5.

simply as another of the subjective factors that, as Kant had argued, condition human access to reality; the acknowledgement of religious experience perfected, rather than subverted, Kant's system by finding a place in it for Protestant inward piety and feeling. Schleiermacher did not break with Kant's fundamental premise that philosophy cannot speak of what lies beyond the bounds of sense.

An evolving conception after Schleiermacher and down to Strauss's time, the notion of religious experience nonetheless seemed appealing—or even necessary—precisely because of the access to extra-subjective reality it somehow intimated. Overall then, the discourse of experience in modern theology is best understood as a "partial criticism" of Kant's thought.[8] It reflected the hope for a way beyond Kant's subjectivism in the name of some more genuine or authentic connection to the divine. It intended to resist the conclusion offered by the Kantian philosophy of religion that humans had to turn their backs on metaphysics and know God, if at all, only as a postulate following necessarily from the exigency of their moral obligations. But while, in this way, it promised a new end in philosophy, the appeal to religious experience remained *continuous* with Kant's philosophy in its means. The philosophical clarification of subjective consciousness provided, if no longer the aim, then still the starting point in the new search for the objectivity of the divine. The problem that eventually spelled the undoing of the philosophy of religious experience was that the adoption of the old Kantian means might not allow for the attainment of the new post-Kantian end. The theory of experience, in retrospect, probably succeeded so well because of its very ambiguity: its refusal to be either fully continuous with or in total departure from subjectivism. And eventually, after World War I, it probably failed so spectacularly for the same reason.

Experientialism in Wilhelmine philosophy

As if by logical consequence, Schleiermacher's attempted correction of Kant's subjectivism returned late in the nineteenth century, in response to the revival of Kant's thought itself. Karl Barth, and the new crisis theology which, as we will see, played such an important role in the young Strauss's thinking, damned Schleiermacher for polluting nineteenth-century theology as a whole, rendering it appropriative and sacrilegious: the discourse of religious experience—Barth and his followers charged—is a discourse about the human rather than the divine. But while Barth dismissed the philosophy of religious experience as a century-long phenomenon, it in fact had only been recently revived. Wilhelmine experientialism remains to be recovered by historians in its full contours, but a few indications of its prominence are clear.

Wilhelm Dilthey, whose work sparked a return to many early nineteenth-century figures, published an important biography of Schleiermacher in 1870, and in 1899, to mark the centenary of the *Speeches on Religion*, the philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) re-edited and influentially introduced them. Otto, whose thought would play an important role in Strauss's early career, worked throughout his life to diffuse Schleiermacher's theology, helping to usher in a major Schleiermacher revival in Germany in the two

[8] I borrow the distinction between "partial criticism" and "total criticism"—itself adapted from Thomas Kuhn's notion that in intellectual life one either accumulates anomalies or shifts paradigms—from Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *Knowledge and Politics*. (New York: Free Press, 1975).

decades straddling 1900.[9] He likewise drew attention to the importance of another of Kant's experientialist successors, Johann Jakob Fries, who attempted to offer a vision of human access to the divine that would be superior to Schleiermacher's and more clearly consistent with Kant's subjectivist premises. He did so by appealing to a sophisticated concept of human "inkling" of a divine presence beyond—an experience in the self precisely that there is something beyond the self.[10]

In combination with such currents, but with more respect for the scientific attitudes of the age, there arose a new field of *Religionspsychologie*, beginning in Wilhelm Wundt's work and then epitomized by William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). James's book appeared in German in 1907 and then in expanded form in 1914 in a translation by the Heidelberg professor Georg Wobbermin (1869–1943), who championed the new discipline in his own constructive theological works. Those pioneering the psychology of religion insisted on the density of subjective feeling involved in religion and provided cross-cultural psychological evidence so wide-ranging that it looked as if it might provide a universal foundation for theological extrapolation.[11] The new discipline elevated to the level of scientific proposition the notion, most familiar from James's work, that religion counted, fundamentally and before all else, as living, subjective experience rather than as hidebound doctrine or oppressive institution.

In Strauss's eventual discipline of philosophy, the appeal to religious experience emerged in a Kantian paradigm, but in the twentieth century it eventually burst the boundaries that had hitherto withstood the pressure.[12] To a striking degree, it is possible to locate turn-of-the-century experientialism geographically at Marburg, where Strauss attended university in the years just after World War I. As a number of scholars have recently noticed, it is *precisely* over the question of religious experience that Hermann Cohen's Marburg neo-Kantianism occasioned the most debate and ultimately came to grief. It is particularly important to grasp how this came about, given that Strauss—who grew up in the vicinity of Cohen's Marburg and may well have viewed him as a cultural hero as well as the model philosopher in his youth—evidently followed Cohen's career quite closely.

[9]Wilhelm Dilthey. *Leben Schleiermachers*. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1870). Friedrich Schleiermacher. *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*. Ed. and intro. Rudolf Otto (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1899). Otto. "Wie Schleiermacher die Religion wiederendeckte". *Die christliche Welt* 17 (1903) 506–12. The Harper Torchbooks edition of Schleiermacher's *On Religion* (cited above) has Otto's introduction.

[10]See Otto. *Kantisch-Fries'sche Religionsphilosophie und ihre Anwendung auf die Theologie*. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1909). In English as *Philosophy of Religion: Based on Kant and Fries*. Trans. E.B. Dicker (London: Williams and Northgate, 1931). For much more detail on Otto's relation to Schleiermacher and Fries (which changed over time), and on the whole career of experientialism through the early twentieth century, see Martin Jay. *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) chap. 3.

[11]See William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (New York: Random House, 1902). In German as *Die religiöse Erfahrung in ihrer Mannigfaltigkeit: Materialen und Studien zu einer Psychologie und Pathologie des religiösen Lebens*. Trans. Georg Wobbermin. (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1907, 1914). See also Wobbermin. *Die religionspsychologische Methode in Religionswissenschaft und Theologie*. (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1913) and *Zum Streiten um die Religionspsychologie*. (Berlin: Protestantischer Schriftenvertrieb, 1913).

[12]Early interrogations of its viability are Karl Wolf. *Ursprung und Verwendung des religiösen Erfahrungsbegriffes in der Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der theologischen Erkenntnistheorie*. (Gütersloh: Bertelsman, 1906), and Konstantin Oesterrich. *Die religiöse Erfahrung als philosophisches Problem*. (Berlin: Reuther und Reichard, 1915).

In Marburg, Cohen had revived Kant's teaching of God as an "idea" or "postulate".[13] Among his Protestant colleagues, however, a respectful campaign of resistance to the full subjective reduction of God to a postulate of practical reason began within Cohen's own governing neo-Kantian framework and remained prominent when Strauss arrived in 1918 (Cohen himself had already left). For years, Cohen's friendly Protestant critics at Marburg—Wilhelm Herrmann, the early Karl Barth, Rudolf Otto—had offered rehabilitated versions of Schleiermacher's strategy in his reaction to Kant's original attack on metaphysics that the best, indeed the only, theological route to God proceeded through an analysis of religious subjectivity, beginning with "the feeling of absolute dependence" on another. While remaining within the neo-Kantian framework Cohen had sketched, all of them hoped to make room for a theory of revelatory experience that Cohen had apparently ruled out in his theory of God as a postulate.

Herrmann's theology, to take a first example, attempted to restore to Cohen's own work the characteristic evidence of the believer's experience of God in moments of prayer and piety. "The reality in which we live is not constituted through the abstractions of science but through the experiences of the self", Herrmann explained in his first critique of Cohen, dating from 1907. From the point of view of a theory of knowledge or of ethics, Cohen's version of the self might explain the construction of reality or the commands of conscience, but, Herrmann explained in a later essay, "it does not follow that the self for man can never mean anything other than an infinite task" to know the world or act morally in it. For Herrmann, this restoration counted as the crucial step toward the recovery of the individual experience of the divine. Thus, he ultimately hoped—like Schleiermacher before him—to recover God through the experience of selfhood by supplementing rather than breaking with critical philosophy. To save selfhood meant to secure the theoretical possibility—although not the uncontested reality—of the individual believer's experience of God's self-revelation.[14]

The young Karl Barth provides a second example of the return of the Schleiermacherian approach. It is Herrmann's theology that sparked his interests; and under the impress of his work, Barth came to Marburg to train under his tutelage after periods in more conservative theological milieus. But Barth, in both the short and long term, also worked under the influence of Cohen himself.[15] In his own early theology, which culminated in his

[13]Cohen introduced the topic of God nearly four hundred pages into his *Ethics of Pure Will* in order to fill a "gap" [*Lücke*] he discovered in surveying the system he had built. See Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*. 2nd ed. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1907) esp. 453, 455. Cf. Siegfried Ucko. "Der Gottesbegriff in der Philosophie Hermann Cohens". (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Königsberg, 1927) 16–22, and Julius Guttmann. *Die Philosophie des Judentums*. (Munich: E. Reinhardt, 1933) 346–51. In a famous passage, Cohen later dismissed without ceremony the charge that he had reduced God to an empty abstraction: "*How can one love an idea*? To this must be answered: How can one love anything but an idea?" Cohen. *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*. (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1919) 187; cf. Ernst Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen, 1842–1918". *Social Research* 10 (1943) 231.

[14]Wilhelm Herrmann. "Hermann Cohens Ethik". *Die christliche Welt* 21: 3 (1907) 51–9 and 21:10 (1907) 222–28 and "Die Auffassung der Religion in Cohens und Natorps Ethik". *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 19:1 (1909) 57–69 and 19: 2 (1909) 167–75. Both rpt. in *Schriften zur Grundlegung der Theologie*. 2 vols. Ed. Peter Fischer-Appelt. (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1967) 1: 106–7, 214. See more generally Michael Beintker. *Die Gottesfrage in der Theologie Wilhelm Herrmanns*. (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1976).

[15]On this important topic, see Simon Fisher. *Revelatory Positivism?: Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) for the prewar period and Johann Friedrich Lohmann. *Karl Barth und der Neukantianismus: Die Rezeption des Neukantianismus im "Römerbrief" und ihre Bedeutung für die weitere Ausarbeitung der Theologie Karl Barths*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995) on the long-term consequences. As Fisher explains, the Schleiermacherian model had such power that the argument from experience often completely

plan for a *Religionsphilosophie* parallel to that undertaken by his Marburg teacher, Barth directly followed Herrmann's strategy in attempting to correct Cohen. Prior to rejecting experientialist theology as insufficiently radical and indeed idolatrous, Barth practiced it. Like his teacher Herrmann, the Barth of the prewar period never saw this correction as requiring a break from Cohen's system; in his view, rather, it helped to fulfill it. For both, the encounter between 'self' and 'divine' remained missing in Cohen's thought; but the interior experience of dependence on the superior and exterior divine could bring it to completion.

Rudolf Otto's theology brought the discourse of religious experience to its finest—and, later, for Strauss to its most problematic—epitome. Otto's masterpiece, *The Idea of the Holy*, which appeared in 1917—when Otto also assumed Herrmann's chair at Marburg, where he continued to teach through the period of Strauss's attendance at the university—most graphically illustrated experientialism's self-subversion. In this book, Otto insisted on the experiential dimensions of religion which neo-Kantianism ignored just as much as the original version of the Kantian philosophy that Otto's illustrious predecessors Schleiermacher and Fries had felt the need to correct in their own day. The so-called *sensus numinus* that Otto made it his mission to recover for philosophical analysis was, in Otto's famous phrase, the experience of "the wholly other" in emotional fear and trembling. In his influential description of God as *mysterium tremendum fascinans et augustum*, Otto's thinking stressed the categorical difference between human and divine. The notion of "the wholly other" unquestionably implied an interest in the qualitative difference, gap, and separation between God and the self: "The truly 'mysterious' object is beyond apprehension and comprehension", Otto explained, "not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other,' whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own". Indeed, the key to the wholly other is its perceived exteriority: "The numinous is thus *felt as objective and outside the self*".[16] The question is whether Otto reached a satisfactory resolution of the most crucial problem: whether this "inkling" of the external divine amounted simply to subjective feeling (that is to say, potentially to illusion) or whether it might allow an affirmation of God's objective transcendence. His failure to provide a decisive answer to this question is what made Otto's philosophy, like experientialism more broadly, initially so promising, and ultimately so problematic.

From Jacobi to Husserl to Rosenzweig: prospects for an experientialist Judaism

It is apparent from the earliest writings now available that Strauss was immersed in this late Wilhelmine debate. In fact, he seems to have initially been enthusiastic about the prospects of the theory of religious experience. He wrote his dissertation in Hamburg

(*footnote continued*)
defined what it might mean to offer a "philosophy of religion". For careful study of Barth's disenchantment with *Erfahrung* during World War I, see Jörg *Zengel. Erfahrung und Erlebnis: Studien zur Genese der Theologie Karl Barths*. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1981).

[16]Otto. *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*. (Breslau: Trewendt und Granier, 1917). In English as *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. Trans. John W. Harvey. (New York: Oxford UP, 1958) 28, 11. Note that even the title makes clear that God is still, in Otto's official view at least, a Kantian idea in consciousness.

under the direction of Cohen's chief disciple, Ernst Cassirer, on the eighteenth-century thinker F.H. Jacobi's defense of "the possibility of an *immediate experience of God* [*die Möglichkeit unmittelbaren Gotteserfahrens*] as well as the possibility, based on this experience, of measuring all historical religions in terms of meaning and of truth itself". Crucially, in this first available writing, Strauss claimed that Jacobi had premised his opposition to subjective idealism—Kant's revolution in religious philosophy—on the thesis that God had to be *available* in some strong sense to the believer. "It is in accordance with the existence and meaning of God that the [philosophical] system has to be erected", Strauss summarized Jacobi's teaching: "The religious ur-phenomenon is not to be forced [*umgebogen*] to fit the system".[17]

But the appeal to religious experience, far from decisively breaking from Kant's perspective, found a way of intimating access to an objective God without breaking with a subjectivist approach to him. In his dissertation, strikingly enough, Strauss did not dismiss the analysis of subjective experience; like Jacobi, Strauss agreed with Kant that all philosophy begins with experience. Only there is a hope, beyond Kant, that philosophy does not have to end there. Strauss's dissertation is sometimes considered a full-blown anticipation of his later thought—in particular his insistence, following Jacobi, on the alternative rationality of revelation—yet it is equally crucial to take note of the elements in the study that suggest the potential promise of an experiential account of the divine, still subjectivist in its means even if it pointed beyond subjectivism as its end. The common view, articulated most recently by Steven B. Smith, that Strauss's early study of Jacobi's thought is the straightforward explanation for his perception in later years of the "radical existential choice" between philosophy and faith may, in other words, ignore the fact that Strauss found reason to think of Jacobi as actually anticipating the different and less radical project of a philosophy of religious experience.[18]

A number of clues support this conjecture. The very title of Strauss's dissertation, after all, promises an investigation of Jacobi's *Erkenntnislehre* or epistemology. Yet more significantly, Strauss in his study, considered Jacobi's insistence—against idealism—on the need for maintaining a link between mind and world to be *proto-phenomenological* in its bearing. In other words, Strauss did not initially understand Jacobi as the advocate of either an irrationalist or an anti-philosophical demarche, but rather as pointing to a new kind of philosophy suited to the religious problem. Strauss continued: "If one had to give a name to [Jacobi's] method, it seems most advisable to use the only recently naturalized expression of 'description' [*Deskription*]".[19] With this word, as indicated in both text and footnote, Strauss referred to Edmund Husserl's early project of the analysis of intentional states of consciousness as providing a route to extra-subjective knowledge.[20] The reason

[17]Strauss, "Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Fr. H. Jacobis". (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Hamburg, 1921). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 289. This same passage is repeated at *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 297 [*The Early Writings*, 57] in the "Auszug" of his dissertation that Strauss published in 1921.

[18]See Steven B. Smith. *Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the "Ethics"* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003) 198. Similarly, I think it is to skip over Strauss's early experientialism to say that "[h]is early essays tend towards a juxtaposition of the two attitudes he derives from the tradition of Jacobi, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Otto, Barth, and Rosenzweig, the either/or of intellect and faith". Michael Zank. "Introduction". Strauss, *The Early Writings*, 34.

[19]Strauss, "Das Erkenntnisproblem", 251–52.

[20]Strauss said he used the word, recently Germanized and associated with Husserl's prewar, descriptive phenomenology, of *Deskription*—rather than *Phänomenologie* that referred to Husserl's interwar idealism. Ibid., 252n.26.

Husserl's thought could seem so tantalizing in the post-Kantian search for the divine is that Husserl's concept of "intentionality" rejected the Kantian dualism between appearance and reality. For both Jacobi and Husserl, the analysis of experience did not presuppose the inaccessibility of some "noumenal" world; it provided an authentic relation to what it described.[21]

Though he wrote his dissertation under the supervision of the neo-Kantian Cassirer, Strauss saw his revival of Jacobi's defense of a kind of phenomenology of the divine as harmonizing with Husserl's subversion of the reigning Kantian epistemology. And so it may not have been in any way a haphazard choice when Strauss went to study with Husserl the very next year. In an anecdote he told over the years, Strauss made allusion to the potential that he must have attributed to the phenomenological enterprise of describing the subjective contents of consciousness—including, potentially, the experience of the divine. The anecdote occurs first in a letter that Strauss wrote to Karl Löwith in August 1946, reminiscing about a period a quarter-century earlier: "Husserl said to me at one point, when I asked him about theology: 'If there is a datum, 'God,' we shall describe it'. What a philosophical statement that was [*Das war wahrhaft philosophisch*]".[22] Strikingly, one finds the same anecdote repeated by Strauss before the audience at St. John's College a full quarter-century later when he chatted with Jacob Klein about their common Weimar origins. In that conversation Klein noted, in a famous remark, that during their youth Strauss had been obsessed "with two questions: one, the question of God; and two, the question of politics".[23] It is thus not too hard to imagine the young Strauss—who studied very briefly with Husserl in 1922—impatiently asking his cautious teacher the first, and perhaps more important, of these questions. In light of Strauss's dissertation, it is possible to understand why he raised it: Husserl, it seemed, unwittingly offered promising tools for a perfected version of the much older project of experientialist philosophy and the route to God that it hoped to find through analysis of the immediate data of consciousness.

Of course, Husserl himself never made good on the anecdotal promise to Strauss to describe the experience of the divine. He merely held out the possibility in conversation. For Strauss, Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, had made some inadvertent strides in this direction. In his dissertation, Strauss had already linked the "descriptive" project to Otto; reflecting an understanding of Otto's own sense of the lineage of his thought, Strauss claimed that Otto's "teaching is united through Fries with Jacobi himself", as if Jacobi had founded a tradition of correcting the subjectivist Kant through investigation of experiential access to the divine rather than utterly breaking with him by abandoning

[21]Explaining Martin Buber's somewhat different "mystical" experientialism (rooted in momentary *Erlebnis* rather than processed *Erfahrung*) in a classic analysis, Paul Mendes-Flohr writes: "Although Dilthey did not suggest that *Erlebnis* provided a noumenal, 'higher' form of knowledge, many of his more enthusiastic votaries would make this extrapolation and, indeed, celebrate *Erlebnis* as a uniquely graced epistemological faculty—akin to what Rudolf Otto would later call a *sensus numinus*—quickening one's apprehension of a sacred reality". I am in effect suggesting that for other figures, like Strauss, Husserlianism appeared to promise a similar path beyond the subject, desired for the same reasons. Mendes-Flohr. *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought*. (1978; Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989) 17.

[22]"Husserl sagte mir einmal, als ich ihn wegen der Theologie befragte: 'Wenn es ein Datum Gott gibt, werden wir es beschreiben'. Das war wahrhaft philosophisch". Letter of 15 August 1946 to Karl Löwith in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3: 663–64.

[23]Strauss and Jacob Klein. "A Giving of Accounts". *The College* 22: 1 (April 1970) 1–5. Rpt. in Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*. Ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) 458.

philosophy altogether in the name of faith.[24] For his part, Husserl in the same period remarked that Otto had in effect founded a phenomenology of alterity, a descriptive science of the divine; writing to Otto in response to *The Idea of the Holy*, he stated that Otto's description of the experience of the divine constituted "a first beginning for a phenomenology of religion".[25] Strauss apparently made the same connection, and though he did not study for long with Husserl, the promise of an experiential account of the divine remained open.

It was following his encounter with Husserl that Strauss came to take the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig's thought very seriously. Rosenzweig's book, *The Star of Redemption*, appeared concurrently with Strauss's dissertation. The most plausible speculation for Strauss's allegiance to Rosenzweig's thought is that he discerned in it, and seized upon, a version of his own theological program of describing the experience of revelation—a kind of phenomenology written in the key of the Jewish religion. Claiming—to many, unconvincingly—that Cohen had been moving towards an experiential position late in life, especially in his posthumous *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, Rosenzweig argued for a new religious philosophy premised on experience—or, in his famous phrase, for an *erfahrende Philosophie*. "[W]e know in the most precise manner, we know with the intuitional knowledge of experience, what God himself … 'is'", Rosenzweig wrote in his essay "The New Thinking".[26]

In his later and well-known preface to *Spinoza's Philosophy of Religion*, Strauss explained the step Rosenzweig took; crucially, for my purposes, it credits Rosenzweig with pioneering a Jewish variant on the theory of religious experience:

> God's revealing himself to man, his addressing Himself to man, is not merely known through traditions going back to the remote past and therefore now "merely believed", but is genuinely known *through present experience* which every human being can have if he does not refuse himself to it. This is not a kind of self-experience … but of something … coming from the outside, going against man's grain… . It is the experience of an unequivocal command addressed to me here and now as distinguished from general laws or ideas which are always disputable and admitting of exceptions. Only by surrendering to God's experienced call which calls for one's loving Him with all one's heart, with all one's soul, and with all one's might can one come to see the other human being as one's brother and love him as oneself.[27]

[24]Strauss, "Das Erkenntnisproblem", 252n.27.

[25]Husserl went so far as to say that Otto's book had "impressed me greatly as hardly any book has for years". Cited from archival material in Philip C. Almond. *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984) 87.

[26]Rosenzweig. "Das neue Denken". *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937) 380.

[27]Strauss. "Preface". in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Trans. E. M. Sinclair. (New York: Schocken, 1965) 8–9 (emphasis added). It is of some interest that Emmanuel Levinas went to study with Husserl at the behest of a Protestant teacher who claimed that Husserl provided the tools to make good on experiential theology; and that he also affiliated with Rosenzweig's account of God's love in *The Star of Redemption* because it seemed to him "exactly similar to phenomenological analyses". See Jean Hering. *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse: étude sur la théorie de la connaissance religieuse*. (Strasbourg: Imprimerie Alsacienne 1925), and Levinas. "'Between Two Worlds' (the Way of Franz Rosenzweig)". *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 190. The comparison with Strauss suggests how deeply an experientialist Levinas may have always remained, in spite of his strenuous attempts to find a vision of subjectivity compatible with alterity. More generally, see Samuel Moyn. *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005).

In my view, there is hardly a better description of the heart of Rosenzweig's project even in the recent literature, the heart presented in the central portions of *The Star of Redemption* on God's loving revelation. Of course, for the purposes of this discussion it is of no consequence whether Strauss's interpretation of Rosenzweig's thought remains plausible. What matters, rather, is that his interpretation suggests that Strauss conscripted Rosenzweig *precisely* into the earlier and ongoing program of achieving an experiential account of the divine that would restitute the object of God through an investigation of the subject.[28] It is important to note how exactly Rosenzweig's argument, in Strauss's rendition, fits the experientialist project: to provide a route outside the subject—to God—through the subject. It was Rosenzweig's emphasis on *present religious experience* and his stress (similar to that in Otto's work) on the route to "the outside" provided by the analysis of experience that, to Strauss, made Rosenzweig the paradigm of the post-Kantian Jewish thinker.

In Rosenzweig, then, Strauss encountered what must have seemed a highly compelling convergence with the project of the discovery of God in the analysis of subjectivity to which his dissertation had been dedicated. Unfortunately, by the time Strauss came under Rosenzweig's influence, the most advanced European theology had already gone beyond experientialism; soon enough, inspired by this new theology, Strauss would turn his career to a devastating critique of the category of "experience" which he had once found so promising.

Crisis theology and the collapse of experientialism

It was Barth's invention, around the time Rosenzweig wrote, of radical "crisis theology" that made the earlier search for the objectivity of the divine through subjective experience seem a partial criticism of Kant's program that needed to be made total. Most famously associated with Barth's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* and the journal that he and his colleagues created, *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Between the Times), Barth made the unknowable alterity not the experiential proximity of God his dominant theme. The mainstay of *The Epistle to the Romans* is therefore the metaphor of God's *distance* from man; the assertion of how "far" God is from man sounds through the pages of the book like a steady drumbeat. The "essential theme" of Paul's mission, Barth notes on the very first page of his commentary, is that God "is not within him but above him—unapproachably different and unutterably strange". The gap between human and divine is described as "the crevasse, the polar zone, the desert barrier" with "essential, sharp, acid, and disintegrating ultimate significance". Examples of such rhetoric practically overflow the text.[29]

Out of loyalty to this unbridgeably distant God, Barth angrily broke with the subjectivist project, which—he charged—not only failed to secure faith in God but implicitly deified man by converting theology into little more than the loving description of man's experiences. Schleiermacher, he wrote in his violent rejection of nineteenth-century

[28]See, for example, Hans-Jürgen Görtz. "Die Wahrheit der Erfahrung in Franz Rosenzweigs 'Neuem Denken'". *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 88 (1981) 389–406, or Reiner Wiehl. "Experience in Rosenzweig's New Thinking". *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*. Ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr. (Hanover: UP of New England, 1988).

[29]Barth. *Der Römerbrief*. 2nd ed. (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1922). In English as *The Epistle to the Romans*. Trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1933) 1, 49; cf. 37, 44, 57, 84, 113 and *passim*.

thought, "is disastrously dim-sighted in regard to the fact that man as man is not only in *need* but beyond all hope of saving himself; that the whole of so-called religion, and not least the Christian religion, *shares* in this need; and that one can *not* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice". Where all of Barth's predecessors had opposed the revival of paganism in their time, Schleiermacher, in throwing the bridge of experience across the abyss between human and divine, had erected the subject as a human idol. "Schleiermacher never possessed", he preached, "a clear and direct apprehension of the truth that man is made to serve *God* and not God to serve man… . Luther's break, not with the impiety, but with the *piety* of the Middle Ages—[and] Kierkegaard's attack on *Christianity*—are [both] characteristic of a certain way of speaking of *God* at which Schleiermacher never arrived".[30] The Schleiermacherian project—in which Barth ruefully included Herrmann his teacher—developed a theology that longed for a God who transcends man, but remained scandalously mired in an immanentist subjectivism that could never conclusively find what it sought. And Barth did not hesitate even to argue that the ruin of World War I followed from the sinful pride of experientialist theology, to which he linked his teachers' reflexive investment in their nation's cause in the early days of the conflict. It was as if by seeing God in nearby feeling—and on their nation's side—they brought their just punishment upon them. "They have wished to experience the known God of this world", Barth wrote in his commentary. "Well! now they have experienced him".[31]

One way—the historical way—to interpret the celebrated endeavor of Barth and his followers in Protestant theology is as a *total criticism* of the prior project in the name of what that project sought. They attempted to extricate the *object* pursued by the philosophers of religious experience while realizing that this object required a fundamental shift in method and in means—a shift outside of the subject. No longer could something "outside the self" be sought through feeling within the self. Thanks to Otto's stress on the majesty of God, Barth could take a more charitable attitude toward him than he could toward Schleiermacher or Herrmann. A crucial indicator of the fact that Strauss ultimately accepted this view—thereby turning his back on the promise of experientialism—is that he joined in Barth's friendly critique of Otto's book. Like the crisis theologians, he came to see Otto as caught in a state of dramatic hesitation over whether the analysis of experience pointed to a God interior or exterior to man.

In Barth's own analysis, the *tremendum* of the idea of the holy that Otto discovered in effect made him a Schleiermacherian foretelling the bankruptcy of his own project. And in what could easily seem an anticipation of the later thinkers, much of Otto's rhetoric in *The Idea of the Holy* insisted on what would come to be called—in the phrase Barth found in Søren Kierkegaard—the infinite qualitative difference between the human and divine. Otto most directly forged a path toward Barth's break with subjectivism in his insistence that

[30]Barth, "Das Wort Gottes und die Aufgabe der Theologie". *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie: Gesammelte Vorträge*. (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1925) 164–5. Cf. his later essay "Schleiermacher". *Die Theologie und die Kirche*. (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1928) and the relevant chapter in *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte*. (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947). These three books are available in English as *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Trans. Douglas Horton. (Boston: Pilgrim, 1928), *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings*, 1920–28. Trans. Louise Pettibone Smith. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), and *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*. Trans. Brian Cozens. (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

[31]Barth, 51.

"the numinous is thus felt as objective and outside the self". In this stress on the categorical difference between the experienced divine and the experiencing self, one can recognize the lineaments of the new theology *in nuce* and waiting to be born. Otto's book, as Strauss also clearly realized, shows how the central insights of the new paradigm first appeared in the old framework. For if the 'other' is only "*felt as* objective and outside the self", then there is still a subject doing the feeling. The felt God, though felt outside, is still inside: still a prisoner of human experience. But in recognizing the situation, in seeing philosophy as *looking* for an exterior God, Otto had prepared the way, however inadvertently, for the act of liberation from possessive subjectivism that Barth now claimed to effect. Barth made this clear in a letter to fellow radical, Eduard Thurneysen, when he first read the book: "This week I read Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* with great pleasure. The exposition is oriented psychologically but points clearly beyond the boundaries [*über die Grenze hinaus*] to the moment of the 'numinous' which is not to be rationally conceived, because it is the 'wholly other,' because it is what makes God godly".[32]

Barth's approach succeeded in convincing many critics that even Otto's theology, wavering in a state of ultimately debilitating indecision between a transcendent and immanent interpretation of religious experience, ultimately pointed beyond subjectivism entirely and so had to be saved from itself for its insights to be valid. They insisted that a choice had to be made: either the divine is genuinely other, and therefore not amenable *at all* to the possessive experience of the self, or it is not really other. As one commentator stated at the time, underlining the apparent confusion of treating the indication of the divine as a subjective, Kantian category or Schleiermacherian feeling: "Either God is in some absolute sense 'wholly other,' and we cannot experience or say anything about Him, *including that He is wholly other*, or we experience something of God, which means God's essence cannot be determined as 'numinous'. *The numinous as category*—whether 'category' is understood in a transcendental-logical or with Otto in a psychological sense—is a *contradictio in adiecto*".[33] Thanks to Barth's resolution of the persisting conflict between the subjective means of religious philosophy and its objective end, a theology of "the other" could now arise on its own, freed of the subjectivist conditions of its emergence. "Subjectivism", Barth's colleague Emil Brunner explained in his review of the first edition of Barth's commentary, "had to be overcome, no matter what valuable services it had rendered … [It] is only a transitional stage in the direction toward the truth, and he who remains in it is in mortal danger".[34] Otto, intending to revive subjectivist experientialism, had actually dug its grave.

As his review of Otto's book (published in 1924 in *Der Jude*, Martin Buber's famous German-Jewish journal) graphically and indispensably shows, Strauss absorbed the lesson of the crisis theologians on these issues. He soon came to see Otto's work—to which, in his

[32]Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, in Barth. *Briefe*. 10 vols. (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971) 1: 330.

[33]Friedrich Karl Feigel. "Das Heilige". Rpt. in *Das Diskussion um das "Heilige"*. Ed. Carsten Colpe. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971) 405. This volume includes several contemporary reviews of the book (though not Strauss's review).

[34]Emil Brunner. "*The Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth: An Up-to-Date, Unmodern Paraphrase". *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*. Ed. James M. Robinson. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968) 69. Brunner's own *Die Mystik und das Wort: der Gegensatz zwischen moderner Religionsauffassung und christlichem Glauben dargestellt an der Theologie Schleiermachers*. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1924) is essentially an attack on "modern", i.e. Schleiermacherian, theology as pagan, immanentist mysticism. Otto, for his part, felt the radicals were the mystics, upsetting the careful balance of subjective and objective elements in theology he had achieved.

dissertation, he had subscribed without reservation—as only a point of transition in European thought about the divine. Writing after he had begun digesting the implications of crisis theology, Strauss offered Otto backhanded praise, choosing to lionize him for the completely post-subjective and post-experientialist philosophy of God that his work had inadvertently and unwittingly foreshadowed. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Strauss claimed, the "wholly other" may have remained mired in the rationalist and subjectivist project of categorizing the faculties of the mind and soul. But, by the same token, Otto's investigation pointed beyond his own premises and therefore deserved praise. For "a deeper understanding of the meaning of 'transcendence' within a religious context is, if not the intention, then certainly the consequence of Otto's investigation".[35] The crucial point about the review, then, is that, following Barth, it suggests the need to rescue Otto's insight from his error: for Strauss, Otto's experiential premises interfered with his post-experiential insight into the need for a God "wholly other" than the self.[36] As he put it, "religion … lies not in the depths of the subject but precisely in the depths of the object. Hence we have no need of the romantic 'philosophy of religion'". The break with Schleiermacherian experientialism now had to be total, for, as Strauss noted in a pithy affirmation, "God is a being beyond experience".[37]

For Strauss, then, as for those in the crisis theology movement, *The Idea of the Holy* could quickly come to seem like an exemplary monument of partial criticism of the prior subjectivist paradigm longing to become total. Ironically, Strauss claimed that this criticism pointed towards Judaism—in part thanks to another of Otto's inadvertent contributions. "It is no coincidence", he wrote, "that Otto derives his substantive categories not least from the Old Testament and from Jewish liturgy". The suggestion is an exaggeration, but it demonstrates that Strauss now wanted to pursue Judaism alone—a vision of Judaism freed from Christianizing distortion—rather than remain caught up in the residuum of subjectivism in Otto's work. For Jews, Strauss commented, the "peculiarly Protestant subjectivism" that tainted Otto's experientialist premises "must remain far-fetched".[38] Yet there is considerable irony in the fact that, *precisely where he claimed to extricate Judaism from its Protestant entanglements*, Strauss provided liberating arguments that matched those on offer elsewhere in contemporary Protestant thought. Put otherwise, Strauss could only claim to break away from Protestantism thanks to a new movement in Protestantism, represented by Barth and his followers. In any case, the Otto review clearly documents Strauss's loss of faith in the prospects offered by experientialism. The rest of his Weimar career can be studied as a critique of that approach—and a search for a replacement.

[35]Strauss. "Das Heilige". *Der Jude* 7 (1922–3). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 310. In English as "The Holy", in *The Early Writings*, 78.

[36]David Myers recognizes the moment of affirmation in the essay but slights the overall critical intent of the piece. See Myers, *Resisting History*, 122.

[37]Strauss, "Das Heilige", 309–10; *The Early Writings*, 77–8.

[38]Ibid. In 1924, Strauss also criticized Wobbermin in similar terms: "[A]s Wobbermin has himself often emphasized, this moment [of 'religious experience'] is conditioned by specifically Protestant assumptions. Here, as Jews, we must disqualify ourselves". Strauss, "Religionsphilosophie: zur Auseinandersetzung mit der europäischen Wissenschaft". *Der Jude* 8: 10 (October 1924). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 344–45. In English as "On the Argument with European Science", in *The Early Writings*, 110. He repeats his evaluation of Otto on the next page.

Experience between useless argument and cultural symptom

Strauss's critique of the category of experience, which runs like a thread through his early writings, is that the appeal to experience could not convince skeptics; supposedly unalloyed experiences of the divine were invariably explained away by the doubtful as reflecting subjective limitations, personal aberrations, and suspect motivations (notably fear). In other words, experience promised but did not provide objectivity. In his celebrated *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, completed in its essentials in 1928 and dedicated to Rosenzweig's memory on its 1930 publication, Strauss presented the critique of religion as in some respects at its most interesting when it attacked the position (now seen by Strauss as typically Protestant in its origins and spirit) that rooted religion in present experience. John Calvin, for example, like Jacobi centuries later, had presented belief as "implanted in the heart of man", based on "inner testimony" or "inner witnessing", anticipating the future dominance of experientialism in modern religiosity.[39] Troublingly, however, this approach did nothing to overcome the distinction between what Strauss termed "the unbelieving and believing manner[s] of experiencing the world". Indeed, Spinoza also consistently rooted his own methodology in immediate experience or "natural light". The appeal to experience thus led only to a polarized standoff with atheism rather than to hard-won theism. As Strauss put it, "Spinoza did not believe that he was rebelling against God in judging God by the verdict of his reason. The so-called personal judgment or verdict of reason, as contrasted with alleged revelation, is identical with God's immediate self-communication which is far above all mediated revelation… . God's revelation by means of the natural light is in itself sufficient, clear, indubitable, common to all men, and unsurpassable in every respect".[40] Spinoza may have defined "natural light" as God's gift but in fact it provided the basis on which he denied others' experience of the divine. The natural light provided by God revealed only his equivalence to ordinary natural processes. So the appeal to experience, far from providing compelling evidence for religion, turned out also to be the foundation of the unbeliever's own critique of it. (Of course, the appeal to experience also failed to establish the atheist's position, but this point only suggested yet another limit of the category).

In another illuminating text from 1928, Strauss appealed to a more recent unbeliever: Sigmund Freud. The founder of psychoanalysis had just then published his scathing *The Future of an Illusion*, and Strauss welcomed it precisely for its remorseless attack on the category of religious experience. Strauss went so far as to describe the proof of God's existence on the basis of "the actual present experience of the believers" (in contrast to reliance on the authority of the Bible or tradition) as "the only [way of justifying religious doctrines] with which it is important and necessary to argue".[41] The other versions of

[39]Strauss. *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1930), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 247–48; *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 192–93. Jacobi later also made *Herzens-Erkenntnis* central. See Strauss, "Das Erkenntnisproblem", 277–83.

[40]Ibid., 254, 256–6; *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 198, 200; cf. the earlier presentation of a similar point in Strauss, "Zur Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas und seine Vorläufer". *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums 7* (1926). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 400–6; in English as "On the Bible Science of Spinoza and His Precursors" in *The Early Writings*, 183–87.

[41]Strauss. "Die Zukunft einer Illusion". Der *Jüdische Student* 25: 4 (August 1928). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1: 435 (Anhang); in English as "The Future of an Illusion", in *The Early Writings*, 205 (translation altered).

theism—those represented in the Spinoza book by the "skeptical" orthodox or the "dogmatic" Maimonides—were dead, as a political matter. Sadly for the viability of religious experience, however, a claim based on subjective evidence made no philosophical headway; it provided "bad criteria when dealing with *the truth*… . The believers assert that they have experienced the existence of God, that they have encountered God; the unbelievers not only assert that they have not had this experience, but they also doubt the experience of the believers".[42] Again, the appeal to experience solved nothing. Like the Epicureans, Freud rooted the "illusion" of religion in fear. Very interestingly, Strauss implied that Freud showed the limits of the experientialist enterprise not only because of the standoff that had arisen but because *the very reinterpretation* of religion as present experience showed how far traditional religion had fallen as a sociological and political force (and thus, incidentally, as a premise on which Zionism could base itself). As Marcel Gauchet would argue much later, experience is not religion's perfected form but religion's last gasp. The experiential God, Freud mordantly observed in a citation Strauss reproduced, "is merely an unreal shadow and no longer the powerful personality of religious doctrine".[43] Atheists showed how weak the experientialist route to the divine now looked: Freud had exposed it as simple pathology and as evidence that religion had already fallen.

Philosophy and Law: beyond subject-centered philosophy

In his Spinoza book, as in his Freud essay, Strauss argued that while the believers could not satisfy the unbelievers by appealing to experience, neither could the unbelievers refute the believers this way. Ironically, in this early period, Strauss considered the Calvinist position (rather than the orthodox Jewish or rationalist Maimonidean ones) to be the *strongest* in surviving Spinoza's critique or religion and therefore in showing its limits. While it may have been impossible to generalize the proof of religious experience for unbelievers, Strauss claimed that it nevertheless proved to be the most unassailable stronghold theism could find. A few years later, Strauss changed his mind, elaborating a second reason for the inadequacy of the project of religious experience: it failed to allow a convincing account of theism. He could do so because his disillusionment with the notion of 'experience' of the 1920s set the stage for his later discovery of an alternative foundation for religion: law.

Strauss made this argument in *Philosophy and Law* (1935) in his dazzlingly powerful, chapter-length critique of the neo-Kantian, Julius Guttmann. Strauss claimed that in Guttmann's *Philosophy of Judaism*, published two years earlier, the very means of analyzing religious experience made it impossible to realize the goal of the modern philosophy of religion. Guttmann had criticized his own source of inspiration, Hermann Cohen, for failing—for typically Kantian reasons—to do justice to God's objectivity. Of course, as I have shown, Guttmann's argument at this late date offered nothing new; the same critique had been presented by Cohen's Marburg colleagues long before. Guttmann,

[42]Ibid., 436; *The Early Writings*, 206.

[43]Ibid., 427; *The Early Writings*, 207. Strauss clarified in response to a critic that his intent in welcoming Freud's argument had not been to concur with his atheism but simply to show that political Zionism had to be rooted in atheism since Jewish belief could no longer provide a consensual foundation for it. Strauss. "Zur Ideologie des politischen Zionismus (In Erwiderung auf drei Aufsätze Max Josephs)". *Der Jüdische Student* 26: 5 (May 1929). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 441–48 (Anhang), an essay omitted for some reason from the English translation.

like them, suggested an appeal to experience as the way to recover what had been lost in the Kantian reduction of God to a postulate. Guttmann, in other words, espoused the position that Strauss had long since found so bitterly problematic.

Strauss's decisive response—offered in light of his loss of faith in such a strategy—is that the move from postulation to experience exacerbates the problem that the move is meant to solve:

> Cohen is not the only one marked by the inability "to conceive God as a reality". The resoluteness of Guttmann's insistence … that "philosophy of religion" must deal not only with "religious experience" but must also take account of the "objective aspect" of this experience and, particularly, the "reality-character of religious objects", testifies to the fact that the understanding, or even the very recognition, of this "reality character" is the characteristic difficulty of the modern "philosophy of religion" that Schleiermacher inaugurated.[44]

The object of the quest remained the same as that presented in Strauss's dissertation: God as a reality. Now, however, Strauss no longer hoped that the analysis of religious subjectivity could provide access to divine objectivity. Instead, he insisted with polemical vigor that the analysis of religious experience showed even post-Kantian modern philosophy to be not a route to the object but just another cul-de-sac in the subject.

This critique meant the bankruptcy of Husserl's phenomenology and Rosenzweig's Jewish experientialism alike. The flaw in the potential Husserlian program, Strauss noted in the continuation of his letter to Karl Löwith years later, is that "those who believe they know something of God disagree that He is a describable datum. (*Die Schwierigkeit ist, daß die die etwas von Gott zu wissen glauben, bestreiten, daß er ein bescreibbares Datum ist*)".[45] To Rosenzweig's "phenomenology" of religious experience, a similar critique applied. Jews follow God not because they experience his love but because they accept his law. No longer could what Rosenzweig claimed to feel in experience—an "unequivocal command … coming from the outside"—be plausibly grounded in it. After all, Strauss observed with disappointment in his later preface, Rosenzweig only subscribed to the laws he chose; and, indeed, he rejected the very category of law (*Gesetz*) except insofar as it followed from the experienced "call" (*Gebot*) of the divine. Did experientialism provide a plausible justification of Jewish law—that is to say, of Judaism's core—or did it allow only a Jewish disguise for another faith?

These views are argued directly, and with the rhetorical anger of the crisis theologians at the modern betrayal of religion, in *Philosophy and Law*. (While, as noted above, his first book is dedicated to Rosenzweig, Strauss's *Philosophy and Law* is dedicated to the memory of his observant grandfather.)[46] There, Strauss claimed that the "existentialism" of recent thought—to which Cohen had supposedly broken through at the end of his life and which Rosenzweig had brought to its Jewish climax—turned out to be not a victory for theology.

[44]Strauss. *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer*. (Berlin: Schocken, 1935). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 35. In English in Strauss. *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*. Trans. Eve Adler. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) 47. Strauss's citation is to Julius Guttmann. *Religion und Wissenschaft im mitteralterlichen und modernen Denken*. (Berlin: Philo, 1922) 68f.; In this earlier publication, as Strauss recounted, Guttmann had made Schleiermacher the key to the philosophy of religion he advocated.

[45]*Op. cit*.

[46]This dedication is omitted from the English translation.

Rather, it was a symptom of decline, and a proof of the mounting bankruptcy of modernity. The experience of the divine, aside from convincing only the person experiencing it, could authorize no way of believing in the biblical doctrine of creation, especially of non-human nature. In this endeavor, he repeated a famous story Rosenzweig had once told, a parable about the simple Jew who asked Cohen how his postulated God could possibly be thought to have created the world (Cohen, struck by the simple power of the objection, supposedly wept in response). Strauss now in effect posed a version of the same question to Rosenzweig himself: how could an *experienced* God serve better?[47] The problem is the same as in the Freud essay. The phantom of the modern believer is not on a par with the creator of the biblical religion, and is a symptom of his loss rather than a method of his recovery. And, if Maimonides had been correct in asserting that he who cannot believe in creation cannot sustain belief in law, then it followed that experience left the authority of law in danger as well.[48]

Strauss concluded that "it becomes clear that the replacement of idealistic philosophy by existential philosophy presents not a radical break but only a progression".[49] Experience, once called upon by Protestants—and even by Strauss himself—to save subjectivism, now came to be seen by Strauss as subjectivism's last, worst, terminal form. Accordingly, like the Protestant radicals, Strauss argued that fidelity to religion ironically required a break with modernity, *especially* the experiential mode in which it had recast religion. A break towards what? Only premodern faith, rooted in communal law, drawing its authority from historical revelation, could serve as the foundation of religion, Strauss now argued. A post-subjectivist Judaism turned out to be, necessarily, a pre-subjectivist Judaism, founded on the revealed law of the past, communally interpreted and enforced. Strauss upended the entire Kantian and post-Kantian project: heteronomy had to be the basis of choice, collectivity the root of subjectivity, and legal obligation the guide to personal experience.

The inevitability of experience?

Strauss's early evolution occurred at a time of massive cultural shift. As Mark Lilla puts it, Kant's subjectivist problematic, altered in various ways by his experientialist followers, lasted for as long as "it could be assumed that Christianity and modern society shared a common destiny. When, in the aftermath of the First World War, that conviction was irretrievably lost, a new conception of the theologico-political problem would be born".[50] Strauss's evolution has to be seen in this historical and conceptual context: as close study of his early career shows, the move away from this Christian horizon took place in the origins of the thought of the very scholar who gave rise to the notion of a "theologico-political problem". But most ironically, it occurred in part, and perhaps largely, as the result of a *Christian* critique of Christian subjectivism, and Strauss's abiding conviction

[47]Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz*, 39–40; *Philosophy and Law*, 48–9. Though Rosenzweig cited the story first, in the annotations to a translation of Judah ha-Levi's poems that he published, Strauss claimed in *Philosophy and Law* he had heard it in Marburg and related it to Rosenzweig himself, thus serving as the story's original source.

[48]Though Rosenzweig is the implicit target of this critique, Strauss offered up as his explicit target the crisis theologian Friedrich Gogarten. Strauss may have been suggesting that only the sequel to the crisis of experientialism that he had found in premodern Judaism, as opposed to those on offer by Barth and his followers, could succeed.

[49]Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz*, 38; *Philosophy and Law*, 51.

[50]Lilla, "Kant's Theologico-Political Revolution", 434.

that modern philosophy—and perhaps modern society—is bankrupt owed its original inspiration to neo-orthodox Christians making the same claim about the bankruptcy of their inheritances. (''Competent people have already cleared the way for themselves'', Strauss wrote in 1925, acknowledging this fact, in reference to the *Zwischen den Zeiten* contributors.)[51] Of course, in his turn to law, Strauss found a different sequel to this failure than they did. No more searching after strange gods, Strauss in effect said with regard to the quest for the divine in subjective consciousness. For Jews, there is only, has only ever been, the law that God gave and to which Jews, to be Jews, must submit.

Strauss's flirtation with, and abandonment of, experientialism in his early career left a crucial legacy in his thought. Above all, it convinced him of the limitations of modernity and the allure of premodern order (on religious as well as on political grounds). Although his position certainly shifted after *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss continued to see revelation's transmutation into law—epitomized in Deuteronomy's staging of the disappearance of the prophet who experienced God's presence and of the empowerment of the priest who merely interprets his law—as a formative moment of the classical, premodern alternative to a destitute modern experientialism. Obedience to authority—especially law—provides by proxy the connection to God that only few Jews have ever been lucky to experience personally, and on which no religion can therefore depend for long if it is to survive in a form immune to decay and dispute.[52]

To leave aside, for the present, the *desirability* of Strauss's—in effect, theocratic—alternative to modernity in *Philosophy and Law*, it is perhaps its *realizability* that makes it most seriously open to question. In his Otto review, Strauss sensed the difficulty involved in *attempting the restoration* rather than *assuming the self-evidence* of law: ''While earlier theology speculated in a religiously closed vault, the new theology lives under the open sky, and must itself contribute, according to its ability, to the construction of the vault. Then, the primary fact was God; now, it is world, man, religious experience''.[53] But did Strauss ever adequately reckon with why the vault had collapsed and whether its rebuilding is possible? It is useful here—since he takes a strong stand on both matters—to appeal to Gauchet's narrative, in *The Disenchantment of the World,* of the trajectory of Western culture from law to experience, a trajectory which Strauss in effect followed in reverse in philosophy in the space of a few Weimar years.

Gauchet considers religion as experience to have been on the horizon for far longer than Strauss assumed. It is historically false, he suggests, to appeal to some predecessor formation (other than the most primitive societies) as an alternative. Even the Mosaic moment, though distant, is among the more decisive points of origin of the eventual collapse of religion, a collapse that ultimately left in its wake only the experiential ''religiosity'' that Strauss turned to combat in his career.[54] What Strauss saw, then, as a prematurely and mistakenly abandoned alternative to experience, Gauchet suggests is simply a predecessor formation to it, bound up in the processes that led experience to seem both so promising and so faulty to Strauss in the course of his career. More seriously, if

[51]Strauss. ''Biblische Geschichte und Wissenschaft''. *Jüdische Rundschau* 30: 88 (November 10, 1925). Rpt. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2: 359. In English, ''Biblical History and Science'', in *The Early Writings*, 134.

[52]For a brilliant demonstration that Strauss, down into his ''Greek'' writings, continued to criticize Kantianism's central premise that the only valid and desirable form of constraint is self-constraint, see G.R.F. Ferrari. ''Strauss' Plato''. *Arion* 5: 2 (Fall 1997) 36–65.

[53]Strauss, ''Das Heilige'', 308; ''The Holy'', 76–7.

[54]See Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde*.

Gauchet is correct, the dissolution of religion as the structuring basis of society (through Moses!) into individual and subjective experience is an irrevocable process. The transition from law to experience that Western culture has undergone is irreversible, except as the still personal and individual itinerary that Strauss followed philosophically.

Strauss's early trajectory looks very different then, if Gauchet is correct in claiming that there is no choice but to accept modernity, that there is no path—as Strauss once hoped—either before or beyond it, for all its unsatisfying implications. Opposing Régis Debray's argument that religion can return (and is returning today) to its traditional role of supplying the structuring premises of social life, Gauchet has written recently:

> Fundamentalism is a wholly extraordinary example of modernization… . For traditional religion rooted in the self-evidence of communal belonging—my belief is that of my tribe, of my group, and is indistinguishable from custom, rite, and culture—fundamentalism substitutes a religiosity of a profoundly new kind, which is a [modern] Western religiosity, a religiosity of the individual. The fundamentalist is a singular believer who begins by affirming a personal position for himself that takes him outside the dominant way of life. It is from an individualist point of view that he hopes to reconstruct a communitarian order—but this project is an aporetic one in which the implicit premises contradict the announced goal. In no case can the fundamentalist ambition to place religion back in charge succeed. Fundamentalism, then, participates in spite of itself in the work of the departure from religion that it intends to combat. It works to destroy the tradition it intends to save.[55]

In attempting to find some position beyond the experiential remnant of religion that he found so wanting, Leo Strauss's "fundamentalism" in *Philosophy and Law* may have done nothing but confirm its inevitability. If the path from experience to law that Strauss took only leads back to experience, then there is no choice before modernity, except whether or not to face it.

[55]"Du religieux, de sa permanence et de la possibilité d'en sortir: Régis Debray, Marcel Gauchet: un échange". *Le Débat* 127 (November–December 2003) 7–8. Though he does not claim that fundamentalism contributes to experientialism, Taylor agrees that the organized attempt to turn back from modern religiosity "shows how far we have slid out of the old dispensation". *Taylor, Varieties of Religion Today*, 98.